

AI INDEX: MDE 30/30/99
30 July 1999

Tunisia: Another blow for freedom of expression -- Abderraouf Chammari imprisoned

Amnesty International strongly condemns the one-year prison sentence imposed on Abderraouf Chammari this morning by the *Tribunal de première instance*, Court of first instance, in Tunis.

"This is another blow for freedom of expression in Tunisia," Amnesty International said. "Abderraouf Chammari is a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for the expression of his opinions and should be released immediately and unconditionally."

Abderraouf Chammari was arrested on 5 July 1999, accused of criticising the family of President Ben Ali of corruption in a private meeting. He was tried in Tunis on 29 July on charges of spreading false information and defamation. He was sentenced on 30 July to one years' imprisonment (eight months' imprisonment for spreading false information and four months' imprisonment for defamation). Abderraouf Chammari denies having made such comments.

"The sentence passed on Abderraouf Chammari appears to be an attempt to silence his brother, Khemais Chammari, a human rights defender and government critic," Amnesty International said.

"This is not the first time the Tunisian authorities have imprisoned relatives of human rights defenders and government critics."

The Tunisian authorities sentenced Mohamed Ali Bedoui, the brother of Moncef Marzouki, the former President of the *Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme*, (LTDH), Tunisian Human Rights League, to prison terms in 1998 and 1999.

Background

Abderraouf Chammari is a civil engineer and director of Hammamet Sud tourist resort. He is a former Vice-President of the *Municipalité de Tunis*, Tunis Local Council.

Khemais Chammari, a member of Parliament and Vice-President of the main legal opposition party the *Mouvement des démocrates socialistes*, (MDS), Mouvement of Socialist Democrats, was arrested and tried in July 1996. He was sentenced to five years' imprisonment on charges of disclosing state secrets and released in December 1996 by a presidential decision.

On 15 July 1999, Amnesty International, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Human Rights Watch, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (LCHR), Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) condemned the heavy sentences passed on human rights lawyer Radhia Nasraoui and her 20 co-defendants in a parody of justice. The trial was characterized by disrespect for defence rights and culminated in a walkout by defence lawyers protesting the judge's decision to prevent one of the lawyers from continuing his intervention before the court. ENDS.../

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